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## Student Associations: News and Events

The University of Southern Mississippi

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## LIS Student Associations News Spring/Summer 2020

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**MLIS Student James Skinner**

### Graduate Student Helping with Food Relief for South Mississippians Impacted by COVID-19

(USM News story by David Tisdale, reprinted by permission from [www.usm.edu/news/2020/release/student-helping-with-food-relief.php](http://www.usm.edu/news/2020/release/student-helping-with-food-relief.php))

With the assistance of a dedicated team of volunteers, a University of Southern Mississippi (USM) graduate student is helping coordinate a food distribution effort to aid those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertain of where their next meal is coming from.

**James Skinner**, a Gulfport, Miss. native who is pursuing a master’s degree in library and information science and a graduate certificate in public history, is identifying food resources and distribution points across the southern half of the state to help get immediate relief to residents in need, as part of a Mississippi Gulf Coast Mutual Aid Network initiative.

The Mississippi Gulf Coast Mutual Aid Network was established in early March 2020 by the Mississippi Rising Coalition, a social justice organization for which Skinner serves as a board member.

With many out of work -- and income -- due to layoffs caused by work closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, Skinner and the organization's volunteers have sprung into action to bring relief to families in the area struggling to put food on the table.

"A lot of people who have lost their jobs and currently have no way of making a living, including many who have not yet received assistance through Congressional relief legislation (CARES Act), are really hurting right now, so food lines are a reality," Skinner said.

Skinner has connected with Hattiesburg and Petal-area farmers Ben Burkett and Dennis Dahmer, who have been invaluable resources for him and the Network, contacting other Pine Belt farmers who have joined them to provide free produce free for the distribution. The donated produce might otherwise have been disposed of, Skinner said, given that the demand from many of their customers, including restaurants that have had to close or limit hours during the pandemic, has declined in recent months.

As the Aid Network is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, these donations not only help the individuals receiving the food, but can serve as a tax deduction for farmers who can really use the help as well, Skinner said.

"It's a win-win for these farmers who can benefit from the tax write-off at this time, as well as recipients of their donations, and we can limit the amount of food that might otherwise be wasted," he said.

The initiative heads into its second week of distribution, which typically happens on Thursdays. Partnerships with a variety of faith-based and civic organizations, among other groups, has been key in the group's success in getting food to those who need it. These include The Salvation Army of Hattiesburg, EL Pueblo in Biloxi, Macedonia Baptist Church in Ocean Springs, and the Jackson County NAACP, among many others.

"We're distributing everywhere, trying to make sure we're getting food into the hands of as many people as possible," Skinner said.

Skinner is also heading up an oral history project, interviewing volunteers and community organizers in Mississippi involved with the current social justice movement.

"James sees the importance of community-building and outreach, and has made such an impact during the Covid-19 situation. He really embodies the university value 'Student engagement that fosters personal growth, professional development, and a lifelong commitment to wellness,'" said Dr. Stacy Creel, one of Skinner's professors in the School of Library and Information Science. "This connection to the community and outreach is one of the things that will make him an outstanding librarian. We're glad to have him in our program at Southern Miss."

The Mississippi Gulf Coast Mutual Aid Network needs more volunteers to support its work with this initiative. To inquire about volunteering, contact Skinner at [james.skinner@usm.edu](mailto:james.skinner@usm.edu) or call/text at **228.236.5323**. Visit the organization's website at <https://givebutter.com/ms-gulf-coast-mutual-aid-network>.

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